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Salazar decision a blow to Utah's economy, energy security

By Senator Bob Bennett

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Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's decision to reject 77 bids from the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) December lease sale was a serious blow to Utah's struggling budget and economy, and signals that the new administration is not serious about its stated goal of increasing our energy security. Instead, the Obama administration and Secretary Salazar seem determined to sacrifice our state's economy to pay back those who would like nothing more than to see an end to all energy development in Utah.

At a time when Congress has been debating legislation to create jobs and shore up our economy, the Department of the Interior is taking steps backwards by killing jobs and economic development right here in Utah without any real justification. The funds generated from the leasing of these public lands would have expanded employment and stimulated our state's economy. Secretary Salazar's decision has robbed Utahns of millions of dollars in royalties and tax revenues and all Americans of a vital domestic energy source.

In 2007, the oil and gas industry provided over \$315 million in taxes and royalties to Utah, which state lawmakers heavily rely on to fund schools, roads, and other essential government services. As a result of Salazar's decision, Utah is losing \$3 million dollars, its share of the lease sale, not to mention the revenue forfeited from lost production. This could not come at a worse time as the state legislature has contemplated cutting a day from the school year to address a 15% budget shortfall.

Secretary Salazar's justification for his decision is that the environmental review process was not complete and he is concerned about the degree of consultation with the National Park Service. In spite of the rhetoric, this lease sale was neither rushed, nor a midnight decision by any standard; it occurred after seven years of careful environmental analysis, consultation with local, state, and federal agencies, and public input. Mike Snyder, National Park Service Regional Director for the Intermountain Region, said that their cooperation with the BLM on this lease sale "has resulted in the kind of resource protection that Americans want and deserve for their national parks." No new acreage was opened to energy leasing that was not available before, and no lands have fewer restrictions on them than before. These leases would be subject to the most stringent environmental protections ever implemented in Utah, and each one of these parcels has been approved by the National Park Service.

I firmly believe that our approach to public lands management should be balanced. I hold the BLM and all government agencies to an extremely high standard when it comes to balancing the resources on our public lands. The truth is that less than one percent of our public lands are directly impacted by energy development. This small and

temporary impact provides a vital energy resource that we all rely on every day. These lands can and are being developed in a responsible manner that protects the natural beauty and wildlife found in our state.

I am concerned that the department's decision to overturn the Utah lease sale was motivated more by political reasons than environmental reasons. As Secretary Salazar devises his plan for managing our federal lands, let's hope he keeps in mind that these lands and the resources that lie beneath them belong to ALL Americans, not just a few vocal and well-funded special interest groups determined to prevent the development of domestic energy and bring our state's economy to a grinding halt.